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Facilitated Work Based Learning - How to Link Work and Continuing Education?

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Present & Discuss Session

Title: Facilitated Work Based Learning - How to Link Work and Continuing Education?

General abstract of the presentation (max. 150 words)

including the aims/objectives of the research, the methodology, the results, and the main conclusions and/or implications for practice

The research project investigates Facilitated Work Based Learning (FWBL), a method developed at Aalborg University, which strives to enhance continuing education by making the classroom and work converge. In this respect the starting point of FWBL is the daily work of the participants and their ordinary work assignments. The study investigated the encounter of companies and the University evolving around FWBL. The aim of the study was to reveal the paradigms and perspectives which supported or complicated this encounter and thus the learning processes. Two cases were investigated. Data includes 15 qualitative interviews and observations of four strategy meetings. Dewey's pragmatic thinking was applied as the theoretical frame. Results show, that the involved actors perceived work and continuing education as two very different paradigms, an understanding which challenged the collaboration and the attempt to integrate work and education thereby impairing the process of learning. The notion of "the third context" was developed in order to create a new understanding of how work and education can interact.

Detailed abstract

1. How is this study founded by theory and/or how does it originate from practice? (max. 200 words)

At Aalborg University (AAU) Problem Based Learning (PBL) is the primary pedagogical principal within all faculties. Due to dissatisfaction with the results of "traditional" university teaching within continuing education, PBL was introduced in a teaching project named Facilitated Work Based Learning (FWBL). The objective of this program was to integrate continuing education of engineers, with their daily work thereby narrowing the gap between work and education. The objective of the research project was to investigate two FWBL courses in order to evaluate the approach and to provide suggestions for improvements. However, a need for investigating the underlying understandings and objectives of the involved actors very soon became apparent, as the collaboration did not proceed as intended. Hence, in order to be able to develop FWBL, it became necessary to come to a more thorough understanding of the consequences of integrating educational activities in every day working life.

The study's point of departure is qualitative data collected from the two case studies. The data analysis and theory development was inspired by Giorgi's phenomenological approach, and John Dewey's pragmatic pedagogical philosophy.

2. What are the central research goal(s), problem(s) and/or question(s) in this study? (max. 150 words)

The main objective of the study was to answer the question: Can FWBL enhance University conducted continuing education by reducing the gap between work and classroom?

This question was formulated due to a core argument within the FWBL approach, stating that real life problem solving must be the starting point of all FWBL activities. Hence, the intension of FWBL is to integrate learning with problem solving. Students should learn while solving problems in their daily working life. However, as the analysis of the two cases reveal it was not as easy as some theories suggest. Hence, the answer to the question stated above is that even though the ideas and perspectives of FWBL seem promising they need to be developed further since the integration of work and education caused more problems than previously presumed. These difficulties are further describer in section 4 and 5.

3. Which research design did you use in this study and which methods did you use to analyse the data (i.e. subjects, instruments/intervention and procedure)? *(max. 200 words)*

The research was undertaken as part of a Ph.D.-project and founded in a qualitative study of two cases of collaboration between AAU and two software engineering companies. Each case study ran over a period of approximately nine months. The researcher did not actively participate in the educational activities.

The empirical data consists of 15 qualitative interviews conducted with employees, facilitators, project managers, and administrative staff from the university along with four tape recordings of meetings and other learning activities. The data material was fully transcribed. In each case study 2-4 engineers participated. Furthermore a facilitator (a university teacher) from each case and two persons from the administrative staff was included in the interview process.

The objective was to investigate the involve actors sense making during the FWBL course; hence, an explorative research strategy was applied. The data was analyzed according Giorgi's theory of phenomenological research. From this analysis the data were chunked into smaller meaning units through a process of meaning condensation. Finally Dewey's pragmatic thinking was applied in order to reach a more profound understanding of the findings. Based on the analysis the notion of "the third context" was developed as a frame for linking continuing education and work.

4. What are the results of this study? *(max. 150 words)*

We are used to think of education and work as two separate things. This was also true for the students in this project. However, FWBL does not fit into either of the categories as it seeks to combine the strengths of education and work. This proved to be very hard to put into practice, primarily due to the different logics that education and working life rests upon. For academic learning to happen reflection is typically required and an important task for the educators is to create time and opportunity for reflection, but in the companies there was limited room for reflection, as problem solving was the main objective, reflection came to be seen as a distraction taking time away from what is important in an organization – solving problems thereby optimizing production.

One of the reasons why FWBL was a very limited success was that the university and the companies did not collaborate. Instead they pursued their own goals – producing goods and producing learning without paying attention to the interest of the other part – consequently none of the objectives were obtained.

5. What are the main conclusions of this study? *(max. 100 words)*

The typical division between work and education in continuing education is unfruitful. One way of overcoming this dichotomy is to remove the intervention from the two existing contexts and in to a third context. The notion of “the third context” provides a frame and language which allows the participants to reflect upon the meeting between opposing paradigms.

When continuing education is carried out as ‘real life experiments’ trying to handle ‘real life problems’, it is important that they make room for experiments, fantasy, reflections and mistakes. On the other hand, the ‘playfulness’ of the developmental learning must not lead to a situation where the students consider the projects as pure “virtual games”.

6. Who (should) use the results of this study and how do the results contribute to the improvement of educational practice? *(max. 150 words)*

The results concern providers of continuing education as well as companies who invest in training and upgrading of skills. People involved in continuing education are increasingly addressing the problem of learning transfer. One attempt to overcome this problem is – as shown in this study – to move the educational activities out of the classroom and in to the organization. However, as our data shows, new problems arise. In this case the overall focus of education – to learn – is over shadowed by the dominating focus at work – to produce. The attempt to shorten the distance that the learning is to travel by relocation the educational activities in the organization erodes the borderlines between the logic of education and work. The consequence of this is that the students forget that they are actually preoccupied with learning activities. We believe that there is great potential in converging education and work, but it is important that this is done with respect to the certain qualities of the different contexts.

7. How are you planning to make your session interactive? (max. 100 words)

Some methods to increase the interactivity in your session could be: Ask delegates to predict answer the results to the research questions; before elaborating your central concept, ask delegates for their ideas and/or experience with the concept; 'demonstrate' your research or treatment by distributing the questionnaires you used or by including video clips of the practice in which you set up the study; ask delegates for explanations of your findings; ask delegates to think about implications for practice; invite participants of your study to intervene in the sessions, for example by Skype; give assignments or tasks to delegates, for example let them brainstorm about the topic or research question; organise a small discussion in pairs about your results; use twitter; present statements or polls to the delegates and ask them to vote 'pro or con/yes or no/green or red';...

Prior to our introduction we want the participants to discuss in pairs their best experiences with continuing education. After this we would like to present our findings and the theoretical implications of these findings. This is followed by group discussions around the question: How can we implement education in a work context without losing the qualities linked to the classroom? Each group presents their answer to this question written on a flip chart.

8. Which question or general statement related to your study would you like to present to the conference delegates for discussion? (max. 20 words)

(e.g. related to your concept, your findings, the implications of your findings, future research plans, how to deal with limitations of your study, etc.)?

How can we implement education in a work context without losing the qualities linked to the classroom?

Please upload this document, which will serve as your official proposal, as an attachment to your submission in the EAPRIL Conference System.

